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BY PETER MAAS

In light of mounting criticism of the CIA, its director, Judge William Webster, talks about the agency's relevance and credibility

Do We Still Need The CIA?

"WE HAVE concerns about the image of the agency," Judge William Webster, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, was saying. "One is how we are viewed on the campuses and other places where we look to recruit the best and brightest people to carry on the mission of this agency. The other is how we are portrayed generally in the public and whether we are seen as a rogue elephant, a loose cannon, outside the law—all of those things which, I think, in a democratic society make people feel threatened and worried."

A little nonplused by Webster's frankness, I couldn't help thinking back to an encounter I had 30 years ago with another CIA director, Allen Dulles, the epitome of the Cold War spymaster.

The CIA then was housed in an unprepossessing cluster of yellow brick buildings near the Potomac River off Constitution Avenue. For a man of Dulles' boundless ego—reflected in the floor-to-ceiling array of editorial cartoons featuring him—his office, perhaps 8 by 16 feet, seemed inadequate.

It was right after the CIA's Bay of Pigs debacle in Cuba, but Dulles seemed remarkably unfazed. If only he had been given more air support, he told me, everything would have been just dandy. He preferred, instead, to paint the picture of an intelligence agency under his guidance that in the future would be bigger and better than ever, symbolized by the CIA's vast new state-of-the-art, granite-and-glass headquarters nearing completion in Langley, Va., a complex he personally had lobbied through Congress.

The Langley headquarters was the only part of Dulles' dream to come unreservedly true. Because of the Bay of Pigs failure (an internal analysis ordered by President Kennedy showed that the invasion had been ill-conceived on almost every level), Dulles soon was relieved of his post. And, in the decades since, the CIA has been regularly rocked by scandal—from the botched attempt to employ the Mafia in the 1960s to assassinate Fidel Castro to its recent murky role in the Iran/Contra affair.

Now Judge Webster presides in the imposing office suite, with its private dining room and private elevator that Dulles had designed for himself and never got to use. Much younger looking than his 67 years, Webster is a model of soft-spoken, reflective rectitude. He was rushed in to restore a CIA image tarnished under his predecessor, the secretive William Casey, whose sudden death left the extent of the agency's hand in Iran/Contra permanently unresolved. Although one of his daughters (Webster is a widower) fretted about that "scary place" when he told her of his CIA appointment, Webster's four-year stewardship has seen none of the sort of "cowboy" misadventures that plagued the agency in the past.

The CIA's historic mission is to conduct and coordinate foreign intelligence. As Webster ponders the challenges of espionage in the '90s—challenges, with the ending of the Cold War, that are far different from those any of the 13 directors before him had to face—a num-

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ber of shots have been aimed at him. In anticipation of inevitable post-mortems about the Persian Gulf war, anonymous State Department officials recently began leaking charges that the CIA missed the boat on Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

To some observers, this was an attempt to shift blame from the State Department after it was reported that our ambassador to Baghdad, April Glaspie, had informed Saddam Hussein—a week before he sent his troops into Kuwait—that the U.S. had no interest in "conflicts" among Arabs. Kept under wraps in Washington until the war's end, Glaspie made an "informal" appearance before committees in the Senate and House, but her testimony left everything still muddled.

Sen. David Boren of Oklahoma, the chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, despairs of ever getting to the truth about who instructed Glaspie to say what. The only thing he's sure of, Boren told me, is that she didn't do it on her own.

A conservative Democrat, Boren is by no means a CIA basher. Yet he also faults the CIA on Iraq. He acknowledged that, about three weeks before Hussein made his move, intelligence began coming in about a military buildup along the Iraq-Kuwait border, with the increasing likelihood that an invasion was imminent. But this, Boren insisted, wasn't good enough.

"We should have had strategic intelligence in place long before that," he said. Boren blames it on a Cold War mindset that's still in vogue at the CIA. While he gave the agency high marks for divining Soviet military strength and intentions over the last 40 years, he said that the world has changed, there are new priorities, and the CIA is slow in adapting to them. In the instance of Iraq, he went on, "we didn't have sufficient Arabic specialists, linguists."

With uncharacteristic candor for a man in his position, Webster agreed that the agency was late in evaluating Saddam Hussein's intentions. But he denied that it was because the CIA was still fighting the Cold War. In the fall of 1989—some 10 months before the invasion—the consensus, he told me, was that while Iraq was clearly the neighborhood bully in the Middle East, the country was too exhausted after its eight-year war with Iran to try any new adventures for quite a while.

"It was a community assessment," Webster said—including not only the CIA but also the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency, our allies in Western Europe, Israel's Mossad and the intelligence agencies of friendly Islamic nations, "which are not lacking in Arabic linguists." The problem, he added, was that "Iraq was a total dictatorship—no dissent tolerated. It is very difficult to get into one man's head, to know what he's going to do until he knows it."

The CIA is the second agency whose reputation and morale Webster has been called upon to restore. After several years on the federal bench in St. Louis, he took over as director of the FBI in 1978. One of his first acts was to remove quietly from his office the bust of J. Edgar Hoover. He also let it be known that he preferred to be called "Judge." At the FBI, he explained, "the term 'Director' had a certain threatening aspect to it," and he wanted to make it plain that he had "no political axes to grind."

Today, Webster said, he is in complete agreement with Senator Boren that the Cold War as we have known it is over. While the Soviet Union is clearly in disarray, and political and economic developments must be closely monitored, he stated without equivocation: "The nature of the threat as it existed before will not be the same again."

According to Webster, along with stepped-up recruiting, much of the intelligence manpower formerly devoted to Moscow is being retrained to handle "regional conflicts and regional disputes, regional problems—emerging all over the world—that the previous East-West confrontation, for whatever reason, covered up." The priority standard for all of them, he said, will be "how they affect our vital national interests."

To help identify these priorities in the '90s, Webster has created a new CIA directorate—in addition to the four existing ones for Operations, Intelligence, Science and Technology, and Administration—called Planning and Coordination, which has a special eye cocked toward the global proliferation of missiles and nuclear, chemical and biological warfare.

He also has created a number of "centers," working out of the CIA's Langley headquarters, to deal with specific problems in conjunction with law-enforcement agencies. One center specializes in counterterrorism. Webster said it had perhaps its finest hour during the Gulf war, pinpointing the "real emissaries" of Saddam Hussein. Nations that "previously didn't want to get involved," he added, "moved quickly and smartly with us.

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People were detained, arrested and kicked out of countries that we knew had come in for terrorist purposes."

Another center concentrates on combating narcotics. "The fundamental idea," Webster said, "is to draw on strategic intelligence, to focus on the movement of drugs and crop growth. By using overhead imagery and some good scientific and technical techniques, we were able to tell Mexico, for example, that their [drug] crop growth was 10 times as much as they thought it was and to identify the coordinates where principal crops were being grown."

Still another step involved revamping counterintelligence and giving it coherence without paralyzing the agency. Webster recalled a story about James Angleton, a former counterintelligence chief who was fanatical in his pursuit of "moles" (enemy spies who have infiltrated the organization). Angleton once received a top assistant of a CIA director in the darkened room he favored. The director himself, Angleton suddenly announced, was "one of them."

"I don't want to hear this," the assistant protested. "I'm going to have to tell him what you said."

"Then," Angleton snapped, "*you* must be one of them too."

Nothing, though, was more important than setting up formal covert-action review procedures to replace *ad hoc* practices in the past. While these secret actions—to overthrow, say, an unfriendly government—are only a small part of overall CIA operations, traditionally they've been the root of almost all of the agency's troubles.

Under the new procedures, when a policy-maker request comes in, a game plan is developed, then it's reviewed by high-level officers of all five directorates and the general counsel's office. Then it's sent on to the National Security Council for more vetting. Questions are asked: Can we do it? Can we do it lawfully? Are the benefits worth the cost? And, subjectively: Is it a reasonable project? Is it consistent with American values?

Webster is under no illusion that a particular covert action will remain secret forever. "I want to make sure that it's a sensible plan," he said, "because we'll have to defend it in the future."

His biggest problem, however, may be domestic. The question is being asked with increasing frequency: With the end of the Cold War, do we really need a CIA? Or, perhaps more to the point, do we need a CIA in its present form?

While most Americans, when espionage is mentioned, automatically think CIA, there are now 11 agencies in the U.S. intelligence community, some of them—like the Defense Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency—quite large. And the classified budget for all them, estimated at around $30 billion, goes through the Secretary of Defense.

"We didn't even have most of these other agencies when the CIA was created in 1947," Senator Boren said. He is determined to overhaul the entire spy establishment, and he has widespread, bipartisan support not only on the Senate Intelligence Committee but also on its sister committee in the House, chaired by his fellow Oklahoman, Rep. Dave McCurdy.

According to Boren, what was supposed to promote the sharp edge of competition among the 11 intelligence agencies has resulted in bland consensus assessments that have been watered down by bureaucratic compromises and foggy focus. Even worse, he said, there is too much duplication and waste, and too little accountability.

Boren also wants the intelligence budgets made public. "Why shouldn't Americans know what they're paying for and what they're getting for it?" he asked. Hearings already have started, and legislation is expected to be in the works by the end of the year.

Unlike what might have been expected in other times, Webster is not hostile to the overhaul idea *per se*. "I am absolutely willing to look along with everyone else at every other kind of way of making our intelligence work better," he said.

And how would he like to be remembered, whatever the outcome?

"As someone," Judge Webster told me, "who came along at a time when the intelligence community was under fire, and, during that time, we demonstrated that we could be trusted, that we were accountable to those charged with oversight, that we recognized the world was changing and moved to be relevant and useful in it."

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